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Peacemaking in the New Testament Period

Probably many people in every generation experience events which threaten them or seem to engulf their world in terror. Just as many western historians divide the twentieth century into periods relating to major wars, so it is with biblical history. Key dates are 721 B.C. (the destruction of Samaria and the exile of the ten tribes), 587 B.C. (the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile) and 70 A.D. (the second destruction of Jerusalem). All too little attention is given to the principles of peace that undergird the Israelite and Jewish way of life.¹ A community life that is ordered according to ideals of serving God and loving neighbour (see Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18) should bear some fruit of harmony and tranquility, at least when the circumstances relating to economics and international politics are favourable. The principles deserve our attention, and even failures in realizing them fully do not invalidate the lessons which may be learned. Considerable space would be required to chart the vicissitudes of the period after the success of the Maccabean revolt in 164 B.C. The Jewish people were favoured with an international situation that permitted growth in relative peace. The author of I Maccabees extolled the rule of Simeon (141-135 B.C.) as a time of peace reminiscent of Solomon's reign, and described in terms of psalms and prophecies (1 Macc. 14:4-15). Unfortunately, this was short-lived, and on many occasions strife among later Hasmoneans wreaked havoc upon both people and land. On one such occasion in 63 B.C., the Roman legions under Pompey were invited to restore order. The shadow of the Empire over the Near East became less and less benevolent in the minds of the people who eventually found themselves paying heavy taxes and hosting a large military force.

1. • See Asher Finkel, "The meaning and practice of peace: a biblical and rabbinic perspective," *Exploring Justice and Peace: Religious Perspectives* (ed. L. E. Frizzell) (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1986).

The purpose of this essay is to sketch the principles that the major movements (Sadducees, Pharisees and Essenes) among the Jewish people in the Holy Land developed for maintaining fidelity to God and love of neighbour. Evaluating in detail the success or failure of the key ideas espoused by each group is not possible within the scope of this study. Outlining the foundations for fostering peace in this important period should be of interest to those considering the peace experience, which should have an impact on society.

1. The Sadducees²

The movement that took its name from Zadoq, the high priest at the time Solomon built the Temple (1 Kings 2:35), was composed of priests and their supporters. The Hasmoneans had taken over the role of high priest in the Temple exercising royal power: they controlled the community in a manner reminiscent of David and Solomon. The Temple was the focus of Jewish life so that the potential of the priesthood for leadership was enormous, especially over those who accepted the priestly prerogative of interpreting the Law of Moses.

According to Jewish teaching, the priesthood of Aaron was designed from the beginning as an instrument to give life (the greatest divine blessing, the fullness of life being communion with the living God) and fostering peace. Thus the priestly blessing concludes: "May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24). The priest was to reconcile the community and its members with God and with each other. This work began with the sacrifices for forgiveness of sins and developed in the education of the people in the observance of the commandments. The instruction (*Torah*) of God in the Pentateuch was the basis for a life of peace.

The great Pharisee teacher Hillel the Elder (in his prime before the birth of Jesus) is credited with the exhortation: "Be from among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving human creatures and bringing them nigh to the Torah" (Mishnah Abot 1:12). While only a select few could offer sacrificial worship, everyone can

2. See J. J. Scott, Jr., "Sadducees," *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) volume 3 p. 439-443; J. LeMoyné, *Les Sadduceens*. Paris: Lecoffie, 1972.

learn from the example of Aaron and carry the gift of God's peace into daily life.

The Hebrew term for peace (*shalom*) comes from the verb "to be complete", implying much more than the absence of strife. The community and its members receive *shalom* as a blessing, the gift of well-being, prosperity, harmony, spiritual and physical health. All of these realities flow from God's presence with a community obedient to the Covenant. Peace is also a responsibility of each member of the people; it is to be sought and pursued actively (Psalm 34:14). Hillel makes clear that the pursuit of peace includes the orientation of others toward God and the divine teaching. Many Jews in the Dispersion were active in seeking converts, following the prophetic teaching that Israel is to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). Hillel considered that openness of human beings to the peace-lover would provide opportunities for teaching aspects of the divine message. Because this situation would involve concrete deeds witnessing to God and his way, it would bring out the best in the individual's and the community's response to the Torah. Indeed, the very zeal in exercising such a mission can lead to abuses, but there must have been many persons of depth who avoided extremes.³

In 6 A.D. Archelaus, a son of Herod the Great and tetrarch of Judea, was deposed and the administration was taken over by the Romans. Like Benjamin Franklin,⁴ the Sadducees believed that "there never was a good war, or bad peace." As leaders of the indigenous community, the priests and aristocracy conformed to the demands of the Roman governor. Soon he was taking the priestly vestments needed for the great feasts into safe-keeping, and eventually the office of the high priest became a Roman appointment. Compromises made in the interest of the community brought the Sadducee leadership into a position of subservience.

2. The Essenes as represented by the Qumran Community

Not all Jews were willing to accept the Hasmonean dynasty as worthy of the high priesthood. The problem of sacrificial worship

3. L. Frizzell, "Reflection on recent Catholic theology of mission," *Journal of Dharma* 6 (1981) p. 41-50.

4. Letter to Sir Joseph Banks dated July 27, 1783.

offered by an illegitimate priestly line was compounded when the calendar was changed from solar (364 days) to lunar (354 days, with an additional month every third year).⁵ How could worship on earth be pleasing to God if it were not in union with the heavenly liturgy? Those who protested withdrew to the wilderness to await the time when their leaders would exercise the sacerdotal function. After all, they were the true sons of Zadoq, and they were the sons of Righteousness (*sedeq*). This community of purists settled near the mouth of the Jordan River near Jericho and the Dead Sea. They considered themselves to be a spiritual Temple; prayer and an exalted moral life replaced sacrificial offerings⁶ until they would conquer Jerusalem and restore proper worship. The Bible was the source of their inspiration for a life of intimate communion with the angelic hosts. Their ideal was an ordered, tranquil life that mirrored the heavenly court, a foreshadowing of everlasting bliss.⁷ The way they expanded the priestly blessing is indicative of this. The last petition reads: "May He raise the face of His mercy toward you for eternal peace (*shalom*)" (IQS II: 4, see 1 QSb III: 21).

After this ancient blessing in its modified form, the Community Rule (IQS) records a series of curses uttered by the Levites. Parallel to the last blessing we read: "May He raise His angry face towards you for vengeance and may there be no peace for you in the mouth of those who hold fast to the Fathers" (II: 9). This indicates that there can be no compromise with hypocrites within the community, nor any fellowship with "men of deceit who have not purified their way in order to be separated from falsehood and to walk in perfection of way." (IX: 8-9).⁸ Nevertheless, the leaders and members of the community

5. For an introduction and the text of the major Qumran documents, see Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls In English* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1975 second edition). See his complementary work, *Qumran in Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).
6. "Prayer rightly offered shall be an acceptable fragrance of righteousness and perfection of way as a delectable free-will offering" (IQS IX:5).
7. "He caused them to inherit the lot of the holy ones. He has joined their assembly to the sons of Heaven to be a Council of the Community, a foundation of the Building of Holiness, an eternal plantation for all ages to come" (XI:7-8).
8. The wicked who persevere in their sinfulness cannot be tolerated: "Eternal hatred in a spirit of secrecy for men of perdition!" (XI:22).

work and pray for the conversion of all Jews to their vision of Torah life, following the interpretation of the Bible by the Teacher of Righteousness. Their very life has a sacrificial meaning in relation to the land (VIII: 10; IX: 4-5) and the sins of Israel (VIII: 3).

Under the authority of the sons of Zadoc, community members are challenged to live according to the personal virtues of truth, humility, righteousness, justice and loving kindness (V: 3-4). Certainly, the ideal consequence of such efforts would be peace within the community. The teacher (*Maskil*) imparts insight (*sekel*) from the Torah to his followers so that they "may walk perfectly, each with his neighbour, in all that has been revealed to them" (IX: 19).

As history approached the final confrontation between good and evil, there would be a time when no further conversions would take place. Then the battle lines would be formed and, after a prolonged war, the wicked would be vanished and evil annihilated. (see the War Scroll).

Such a theology of history would require practical assessments of the situation with the decision to mobilize the army of the "sons of light" for the war. Clearly, the invasions of the Roman legions in 66 A.D. became the occasion that was interpreted as the time when God would bring victory to His people. Survivors of the debacle must have been shaken in their faith, but no records survive from the Qumran community after 68 when the settlement was destroyed. Peace making with a militant option may not guarantee survival.

3. The Pharisees

Like the Essenes, the Pharisees (*Perushim*, "separated ones") emerged as a distinct group by the beginning of the first century B.C. The core of the Pharisee teaching was the belief that Moses received an oral Torah along with the written one on Mount Sinai. Knowledge of this tradition allowed educated lay people to interpret the commandments so that their meaning for daily life would be clear. Although the Sadducean priests were accepted as legitimate in the exercise of Temple worship, their role as teachers of Torah was diminished. The Pharisees interpreted God's words at Sinai "You are a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6) to apply to all Israel, so they fos-

tered a piety that imitated the priestly purity laws in the home. This emphasis on experiencing God's presence in the ordinary rhythms of life was an important factor in the preservation of the Jewish heritage down through the centuries.⁹

An early teacher, Simeon the Just, declared: "By three things the world is sustained—by the Torah, by (Temple) worship and by deeds of loving kindness" (Mishnah Aboth 1:2). Thus, he stressed the unity of life with study, prayer and virtuous activities being its component parts. This vision was promoted at Qumran as well.

About the time the Temple was destroyed, and reflecting on that catastrophe, Simeon ben Gamaliel said: "By three things is the world sustained—by truth, by judgement and by peace, as it is written: 'Execute the judgement of truth and peace' (Zechariah 8:16)" (Aboth 1:18). In a world dominated by the Gentiles, and lacking the unifying strength provided by the Temple, there was need for clear expression of principles that foster justice and peace. This appeal to the principles that can be understood across cultures is basic to the survival of the Jewish people, at least in the domain of human effort.

During this period there was considerable discussion about the implications of the commandments (numbered 613 by the rabbis) of the Torah. The Pharisees discerned four relationships in the Law of Moses: the individual and the community touch God, neighbour, self and nature, with attitudes and actions that foster either peace or discord. There is no room for neutrality.¹⁰ Moving from thought and intention to action, each person accepting the Torah, is governed by principles that promote justice, right order, integrity and peace.

4. Jesus and the First Christians

Scholars of recent generations have made valiant attempts to discuss the teachings of Jesus in comparison with and in contrast to

9. See Mary Douglas' appendix to Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

10. See Asher Finkel, "The Suffering Servant," *SIDIC Review* 19 (1986).

Jewish background and the later Christian use of his message.¹¹ Themes relating to peace cannot be presented in such detail here. Rather, the witness of Matthew will be a way of discerning some of the principles in Jesus' thought.

Matthew offers the sermon on the Mount as the initial program of Jesus' moral and spiritual instruction. The beatitudes (5:1-12) begin and end with an acknowledgement of human creaturehood in its inherent weakness and emptiness (5:1-4). But to follow Jesus, the disciple must respond to the ancient challenge (Leviticus 19:2) to imitate God's righteousness (integrity) and mercy (see Exodus 34:6-7, interpreting the divine Name to mean "God is love"). Then the person will reveal the peace that is God's gift to the world and manifest that he or she is indeed created in the divine image (5:9). Such activity will be met with hostility, so fidelity in times of persecution is another component of a Christians way of life (5:10-12). This call to active service of God and neighbour is thus placed within a setting that emphasizes the limit within which human beings find themselves.

Like other Jewish teachers, Jesus interpreted commandments by placing a fence around each: Govern thoughts and desires so that actions will be worthy (5:21-48). The law limiting retaliation to a like response (Exodus 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21) was a great triumph over primitive violence (see Genesis 4:23-24). However, Jews had already substituted a system of monetary fines for physical retaliation, and Jesus advocates non-violence and generosity.

Perhaps some of Jesus' contemporaries interpreted "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19:18) to have a correlative to "Hate your enemy." Such would be the case for adherents to Qumran's teachings only after the final conflict begins. Jesus, however, includes enemies among one's neighbours and calls for prayer on behalf of persecutors (Mt 5:44) in imitation of God's bounteous love (5:45). Thus, disciples aspire, to reflect something of the heavenly Father's perfection (5:48).

11. A brief survey is offered by L. Frizzell, "Peace in the Hebrew Bible," *Encyclopedia of Peace* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1986). Problem passages are studies in the complementary article "War in the Hebrew Bible".

The Lord's prayer (6:9-13) offers a succinct presentation of the order to be cultivated in the Christian life, placing God first and following the orientation to the kingdom with the concerns of daily existence.¹² Only the petition for forgiveness receives an interpretation (6:14-15, see 18:21-35), undoubtedly because a major obstacle to a truly peaceful life is the refusal to forgive the sins of others. The maxim "measure for measure" is applied to human relationships since each person should see others as mirrors of the divine image (see 25:31-46).

Undue concern about possessions is another obstacle to a life of peace. Although poverty is not a blessing in itself (5:3), awareness of human needs should be a basis for ordering daily life toward its true goal (6:19-21, 24-34).

True peace is not achieved by compromising the principles essential to one's communion with God. Commitment to God's will takes precedence even over family relationships (10:34-39).

Jesus' mission of teaching and healing brought him into conflict with the leaders of the land. The inherent danger in physical violence (26:52) draws attention to Jesus' understanding of the commandment "You shall not murder" (5:21-26).

The crucifixion seems to show how misguided leaders and brute force snuff out the life of those challenging them. However, God does not let injustice thwart out his plan. Jesus' resurrection became the foundation for Christian faith that peacemakers and those persecuted unjustly are indeed God's children, heirs to a richer life and higher destiny than that sought by the pursuers of power, pleasure, wealth and influence.¹³

5. Events leading to the Jewish War

Both Josephus Flavius, the Jewish historian who was active in the decades before and after the fateful confrontation with Rome, and

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12. A thorough investigation is offered by Asher Finkel, "The prayer of Jesus in Matthew", *Standing Before God* (edited by Finkel and Frizzell) (New York: Ktav, 1981) p. 131-170.
 13. A somewhat different survey of Matthew (completed by a survey of Luke, Paul and John) is found in L. Frizzell "Peace according to the New Testament", *Encyclopedia of Peace* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1986).

the Acts of the Apostles (5:35-39) speak of guerilla fighting against the Roman presence in Judea and Galilee at the time Archelaus was deposed (6 A.D.). Whether there is a link between these and the Zealots is debated, but in any case there were people in the early days of Roman governments who opposed paying taxes and who claimed that God is Israel's only king. Acceptance of Caesar was seen as a sin against the first commandment (Exodus 20:2-6). By 66 A.D., there was a full-scale revolt against the empire.

The priestly leaders of the Zealots encouraged their followers to take Phinehas (Numbers 25:10-13),¹⁴ Elijah (1 Kings 19:10)¹⁵ and Judas Maccabeus (2 Maccabees 15:7-16) as their models. These people, too, scorned danger and death in their commitment to a very strict observance of the commandments. When the Zealots took over Jerusalem, they destroyed the archives with their records of the debts (Josephus, *Jewish War* IV ix, 3). Quite understandably, these acts brought them considerable popular support.

Josephus has described the war in graphic detail,¹⁶ and tells of the many competing groups among the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the numerous refugees who fled from their own towns as the Romans approached. Rabbis of later generations, who reflected theologically on this tragic fratricidal struggle among the Jews themselves, declared: The first Temple was destroyed because of the people's sins of idolatry (see Ezekiel ch. 8-9) and the second Temple was destroyed because of the sins against the neighbour.

Eusebius, the Church historian of the fourth century, quotes earlier Christian writers who recounted that Christians fled from Jerusalem

14. Because of Phinehas' zeal, God promises a "covenant of peace" to him and his descendants (Numbers 25:13).

15. See L. Frizzell, "Elijah the Peacemaker: Jewish and early Christian interpretations of Malachi 3:23-24", *SIDIC Review* 17 (Number 2, 1984).

16. For various facets of this period, see E. Bammel and C.F.D. Moule (ed.), *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge University Press: 1984). Tessa Rajak, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) offers a fine study of this writer.

A sociological approach to this work is given by Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements of the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston-Seabury, 1985).

to Pella (across the Jordan and to the north) as the Roman legions approached. Even though the historicity of this flight is debated among scholars,¹⁷ it was remembered as an adherence to Jesus' teaching. They followed his advice to avoid violence and to flee the impending destruction (Mt. 24:15-22).

The great leader of the Pharisees, Johanan ben Zakkai, remained in Jerusalem and tried to reconcile the feuding Jews so they would present a united front against the advancing Romans. When he was convinced that defeat was inevitable, he decided to leave the city with his disciples. The Romans still allowed movement in and out of the walled city, but Johanan had to deceive his enemies within Jerusalem itself. Later tradition records that he was carried out in a coffin, with his disciples as mourners.¹⁸ Then, the story goes he went before the Roman general Vespasian and declared that the general would be the next Emperor. He was permitted to settle with his followers in the coastal town of Yavneh (Jamnia) where they began the task of reconstructing Jewish life.

The second revolt against Rome (132-135 A.D.) under Simeon bar Kozabah had the support of great leaders of the Pharisees.¹⁹ Rabbi Akiba named him "bar Kokhba" (son of the star, see Numbers 24:17) a Messianic title. This shows that the Pharisees and their heirs were not strict pacifists. However, the terrible crushing of the Jews by the Emperor Hadrian in 135 A.D. and their exclusion from the area

17. A recent survey of Pella (concluding that the fight is not historical) may be found in Gerd Lüdemann, *Paulus, der heidenapostel II Antipaulinismus in frühen Christentum* (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck and Ruprecht, 1983).

See also Barbara Gray, "Movements of the Jerusalem Church during the first Jewish war", *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 24 (1973) p. 1-7.

See also Lüdemann, "The Successors of Pre-70 Jerusalem Christianity: A Critical evaluation of the Pella tradition", *Jewish and Christian Self-Definitions* (ed. E.P. Sanders) (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) p. 161-173.

18. Jacob Neusner, "The Formation of rabbinic Judaism: Yavneh (Jamnia) from A.D. 70-100", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1979) 2:19,2 p. 3-42.

19. Yigael Yadin offers a 'popular study in *Bar Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* (New York: Random House, 1971).

around the ruins of Jerusalem (replaced by a Roman city, Aelia Capitolina) led the rabbis to downplay messianic hopes and aspirations for political freedom. Jewish life had been dealt another severe blow, and the loss of Jerusalem again became the occasion for perennial lament. However, the people preserved their identity and to this day continue to transmit their spiritual and intellectual heritage.

Conclusion

The responses to the heavy hand of a major power ranged from accommodation (Sadducees) to the threat of warfare (Qumran) and guerilla activities (Zealots and similar groups). Between the extremes were the Christian attitude of non-violence and the Pharisee attempts at mediation and reconciliation (within the community—there were no mechanisms beyond legations of appeal before Rome itself). Only these latter two communities survived, both withdrawing to regain or develop strength that flowed from the principles of their teaching. These might be said to embody the peace movements of their time, conceived with the conviction that peace must be the substance and goal of every relationship. They taught, moreover, that the peacemaking process must be integrated into the fabric of daily life and not merely pursued in the context of imminent disaster. Is this not the challenge in every society and for each individual? The time to begin taking peace seriously is when all seems to be going well, and most people are pursuing personal (and perhaps selfish) goals, taking the fragile gift of peace for granted.